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ABSTRACT

This paper explores assumptions about children's political thinking as reflected in African American children's literature, with particular attention to picture books and illustrated magazine stories. Framed in terms of the "art or propaganda" distinction that the Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke used to clarify the role of art in social change, the paper discusses how African American children's literature since the Harlem Renaissance has taken up issues of race and racism. Many books have been intended to combat racism, but neither the artistic nor political merits of a book guarantee its success in an antiracist curriculum. One contribution that educational research can make is challenging the assumption by white teachers that a well-intentioned book will not be offensive to people of color. Research can help sensitize teachers to the issues they need to consider and it can provide a context for deciding the appropriateness of a particular book in the classroom. The example of the book "Nappy Hair" by Carolivia Herron shows that a book may be regarded very differently by different groups. (Contains 22 endnotes and 64 references.) (SLD)

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Art or Propaganda? Pedagogy and Politics in Illustrated African-American Children's Literature since the Harlem Renaissance

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore assumptions about children's political thinking as reflected in African-American children's literature. Particular attention is given to picture books and illustrated magazine stories. Framed in terms of the "art or propaganda" distinction that the Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke used to clarify the role of art in social change, the paper discusses how African-American children's literature since the Harlem Renaissance has taken up issues of race and racism.

Art or Propaganda? Pedagogy and Politics in Illustrated African-American Children's Literature since the Harlem Renaissance

During an interview with African-American artist and children's book author Faith Ringgold, NPR's Jacki Lyden observed that Ringgold's most recent book, *The Invisible Princess*, "deals in this almost mystical way with the harshest of subjects, African-American history."[1] Unavoidably, said Lyden, addressing African-American history means taking account of "great brutality" and "suppression." The question that Ringgold's focus on this brutal history raised for Lyden is: why? Why choose to write children's books about such topics as racism, oppression, segregation, and slavery? "At what point," she asked Ringgold, "did you decide that these were subjects that you would deal with in children's books?" (NPR transcript, 10).

Invoking the common assumption that poverty and oppression are adult issues, Lyden's question implies that children's literature ought to preserve children's political innocence, not draw them into contact with the harsh realities surrounding them. Mirroring this view, mainstream books for children usually avoid any mention of racism or racial conflict. In many cases, they may not even depict different races; instead, they celebrate a raceless diversity wherein bunnies, raccoons, badgers, kittens, puppies, and skunks are all shown as getting along. Only the occasional hurt feeling hints at the possibility of discord.

In child-centered and expressivist approaches to education, as in colorblind approaches to children's literature, the equation of childhood with political innocence often translates into an assumption that color and class are superficial characteristics added on to "natural" experience. Indeed, white, middle-class teachers working in child-centered traditions may take

it as a moral as well as an educational principle that children are naturally colorblind.[2] Accordingly, such teachers may specifically distance themselves from racial politics, considering such concerns to be adult-centered or teacher-centered. Yet the innocent literary experience deemed meaningful for children in most child-centered literacy pedagogy is not child-centered so much as it is adult-minus-the-awkward-truth-centered. The approved versions of authentic childhood literary experience are not *pre*-political but *de*politicized, for the "innocence" deemed appropriate to childhood is arrived at backwards, by stripping adult experience of identifiable political significance.[3]

The question Lyden asked Ringgold — "At what point did you decide that these were subjects that you would deal with in children's books?" — betrays the assumption (common among whites, although not confined to whites) that African-American parents, teachers, and children's book authors have the option of hiding harsh racial realities from children. Rejecting this assumption, Faith Ringgold points out that one cannot ignore one's history or one's situation. The question as to whether to talk about racism is not a choice for those who suffer from it; the only choice lies in *how* to talk about it.

> Well, you know, these are our stories. These — this is what we're dealt. I mean, this is what we have been dealt as a people. And I think it has made African-American people who they are — who we are, this history — this coming here, this way we came here and the way we have survived being here. And so I think also that there's a magical quality that black people have developed which is the ability to turn the worst kind of situation, the ugliest form of light, into something beautiful, in terms of art, music and dance. Sing about it, dance about it, tell a story about it, paint a picture about it, you know, so that it turns it from evil to good (NPR transcript, 10).

For Ringgold, acknowledging the painful dimensions of black experience in children's

literature is a way to redirect the possibilities found in blacks' collective experience, transforming pain into art. For many mainstream observers, however, focusing on the history of racial oppression is inappropriate in books written for children, smacking of good-for-you adult intentions rather than attunement to the needs and interests of children. Occasional historical or biographical children's books may draw a moral about the long-ago evils of slavery or may celebrate the leadership of Sojourner Truth or Frederick Douglass, but, like school texts, such books have a didactic, improving purpose. In the rather dichotomous terms of the Western, child-centered tradition, *art* for children is defined as the art of make-believe, free of any didactic element that introduces children to adult knowledge or conventions.

Because the child-centered tradition regards racism as an adult issue, it tends to view children's literature that acknowledges racial oppression as a kind of propaganda that smuggles grown-up issues into what should be a time of childish innocence. Far from preparing children for the adult world, Alison Lurie suggests, children's literature — if it is artistic — *subverts* the grown-up order. With respect to race, this stance has usually meant that children's literature affects colorblindness in the form of an Emperor-has-no-clothes inability to see the racialized categories that govern adult relations. Such colorblindness is almost inseparable from the mainstream view of childhood, according to which all children — brown, black, or white — ought to be protected as long as possible from the knowledge of racism, so that they may enjoy the innocence that is the universal right of childhood.

But those who suffer from racism cannot be protected from the knowledge of racism; they can only be lied to about it. If we reject the white, middle-class assumption that children must be protected from any knowledge of social power relations, then the notion that politics

has a place in children's literature and children's education no longer looks like an automatic invitation to propaganda. Avoiding the child-centered tradition's dichotomy between childhood innocence and adult politics, this essay examines the art/propaganda question in black children's literature in light of the recognition that racial politics are as much part of children's experience as they are of adults' experience. Politics in children's literature certainly may take the form of propaganda — that is, a lesson or a message — but it also may take the form of art. In what follows, I examine the evolution of the African-American tradition in children's literature from a propagandist to an artistic orientation. Because the art/propaganda distinction found in much of the white, child-centered literature tends to rely on an assumed opposition between childish innocence and adult politics, however, I draw on African-American philosopher Alain Locke's distinction between art and propaganda.[4] According to Locke, art does not preclude politics, but it does require that the artist refrain from setting out to correct errors in the dominant ideology. Instead, the artist must set forth an original vision. In the next section, I discuss Locke's distinction between propaganda and art with respect to racial self-consciousness in African-American children's literature.

Art and Propaganda in African-American Children's Literature

Contemporary African-American children's literature marks a new realization of the possibilities of politically aware children's literature as art. Artistic children's literature is not new, of course; nor is a political emphasis in children's literature. But the artistic transformation of political experience found in some of today's African-American children's literature *is* new, testimony to the rich contemporary interpretations being given to black children's experience as not merely individual, not merely childlike, but also cultural,

political, and historical. Summarizing a half century of African-American children's literature, Augusta Baker suggests that "we have now reached the point where most aspects of the human experience in the black community can be portrayed in children's books without being self-conscious" (88).

In earlier black children's literature, racial self-consciousness was often expressed in the form of defensiveness about racist stereotypes and an over-emphasis on uplifting racial imagery.[5] Much of the early African-American children's literature also included overt appeals to specific moral or political conventions and adopted a somewhat didactic approach to political understanding. For example, *Floyd's Flowers*, a 1905 reader billed as simple, amusing, and elevating, included a hundred short stories for African-American children that were characterized by an almost uniformly earnest and improving tone. Meant primarily to instruct young readers and only secondarily to entertain them, the stories for the most part consisted of moral and cautionary tales ("False Pride"), moral reminders and statements of principle ("The Alphabet of Success"), improving historical and biographical accounts ("Samuel C. Armstrong," "Benjamin Banneker, The Negro Astronomer," "Edmund Asa Ware," "Negro Heroes"), and otherwise uplifting stories.

Surprisingly, given the author's overt project of racial uplift, some of the amusement that the book promises relies on racial caricatures and stereotyped uses of dialect. In other cases, the intended humor is tied to the quaintness of childish misunderstandings; although addressed to children, the humor in such stories is geared to an adult audience. The attempts at humor, however, are only occasional. For the most part *Floyd's Flowers* proffers moral guidance of a kind that reflects Booker T. Washington's philosophy of race uplift. Perhaps in

part because of the author's overtly didactic purposes, the book is self-conscious not only in its politics and pedagogy but in its attempts at entertainment, rendering the stories too wooden to appeal to most modern audiences. Yet, for earlier generations, *Floyd's Flowers* served an important purpose, providing African-American children with reading materials that accorded blacks far more dignity than anything that could be found in mainstream books or periodicals.

In their attempts to compensate for the racism of the dominant social order, early black children's books such as *Floyd's Flowers* paralleled some of the early black literature for adults. Both children's and adults' literature played an important role in refuting white stereotypes of blackness; in attempting to answer the dominant discourse, however, they suffered from an aesthetically debilitating self-consciousness. According to Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke, African-American artists of previous generations, in their anxiety to avoid racial stereotypes, had fallen into the traps of "bathos and didactic[ism]" or "studied and self-conscious detachment."[6] The difficulty that self-consciousness poses for art, Locke suggested, is that it forces it into a reactive stance: the artist tries to answer anticipated biases or objections instead of expressing an independent artistic vision. Not unlike Carter G. Woodson, who, in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, argued that African Americans must represent knowledge on their own terms rather than borrowing a framework articulated to whiteness, Locke argued that African-American art had to start from a fresh perception of black experience and not from a framework of argument developed specifically to counter racist ideas. Any genuinely new African-American art, he suggested, had to venture into the unknown, generating *new* knowledge about black experience, including new ways of seeing the past. Rather than attempting to set the record straight — a project that

Locke characterized as propaganda — art would have to reimagine and reconfigure experience in original terms.

While Locke argued that art should not be subordinated to propaganda, his position was not that art ought to avoid politics, but that it ought to avoid framing meaning in the form of an argument. For Locke, the problem with racial propaganda is not that it is necessarily biased or that it attempts to indoctrinate its audience, but that it is intended to serve as a counter-argument to racism. Because it must borrow a problematic framework as its point of departure, while at the same time attempting to undermine the perceived "givenness" of that framework, any counter-argument is effectively parasitic on the very beliefs and assumptions it seeks to discredit. In *answering* deficit theories about blackness, propaganda treats such theories as a reasonable ground from which to start. The result, Locke suggests, is that propaganda cannot actually reorganize thinking. It cannot start us off from some new way of seeing the world; instead, it accepts the old ways of seeing and tries to correct for their errors. It is additive or subtractive, not transformative.

Whereas propaganda takes a defensive position by attempting to *correct* stereotypical views of blackness, art does not address particular beliefs as true or false; it simply starts somewhere else. Because it engages its audience not in terms of existing assumptions about race but in terms of *possible* relations, art is free to reimagine experience outside the terms set by ethnocentric discourses. The "self-contained" work of art, Locke wrote in "Art or Propaganda?", creates its own terms for understanding and appreciation (312). Organized by a distinctive, original vision, art transforms the existing meaning of experience. Unlike propaganda, then, art induces shifts in our overall system of beliefs. Because it reinvents the

conventions that govern meaning-making, art calls out new responses to experience.

Perhaps the best test of whether a work is art or propaganda is the test of time. Over time, John Dewey has suggested, a work of art continues to offer us fresh possibilities of insight and responsiveness: the meanings it has for us at our first reading are enriched by subsequent readings, and may even be overturned as we realize that our first response accepted conventions that the art work problematizes. Generative and provocative, art can only be understood in emergent terms. Propaganda, on the other hand, is meant to give rise to an immediate, more or less fixed response — a response that may no longer be possible once the original conditions to which it was referenced disappear. Novels or poems that, in their own day, were considered radical and transcendent may later appear quaint or dated if their effect depends on overturning beliefs that the audience no longer holds.

For cultural pragmatists like Locke and Dewey, the educational importance of art is not reducible to any particular message but lies the education of the senses, the enlargement of an audience's interests, and the opening of new possibilities for responsiveness -- thus, for example, was Picasso educated by his exposure to African masks. In urging the artists of the Harlem Renaissance to engage in an art of social protest, Locke was asking painters, poets, novelists, dramatists, actors, sculptors, musicians, and other artists to teach both blacks and whites new ways of seeing blackness. For such art to be educational in the largest sense — transformative rather than additive or subtractive — it had to be art and not propaganda. Accordingly, Locke urged that the art of the Harlem Renaissance not merely present positive and uplifting images of blackness but represent black experience in all its diversity and complexity. Whereas literature intended to provide a counter-argument to racism is likely to

settle on some predetermined anti-racist formula for understanding blackness, art as Locke understood it could not treat blackness as an invariant condition but had to take as its material the multiplicity in black experience.

Similarly, Rudine Sims points to the need for African-American children's literature to reflect the "wide range of individual experiences and social and economic circumstances" among blacks (10). Contrived characters and plots intended to correct false ideas about blackness soon betray the historically contingent character of an author's project, for as social conditions change, the fictional characters and situations can be seen to mirror out-of-date principles rather than any original artistic vision. What makes art original is its experimentation with new ideas and new relations, so that received truths and established certainties are unsettled. "Writers need to take chances," says Virginia Hamilton (120). To create art with enduring value, writers and artists cannot confine themselves to literally correct,"documentary" truths or "exact" representations of black language and behavior (118). Nor can they follow a blueprint for authenticity set forth by the authority of the moment. To speak beyond the historically contingent moment, children's literature cannot *control* meaning but must produce new possibilities for meaning. It must be generative.

Racial Politics in Children's Literature

Both from Locke's perspective and from that of mainstream critics of children's literature, the earliest black-authored texts for children would be considered propagandist, for they were primarily corrective and inspirational in character. Explicitly didactic, they sought to set the racial record straight. From the mainstream perspective, such texts are propagandist because they carry a message that is important to the adult world but that may be meaningless

to children, who are assumed to be innocent about racial politics. From Locke's perspective, however, it is not the "racialization" of experience that renders such texts propagandist, since experience in a racist society is always already racialized. Rather, they are propagandist because they attempt to correct racist misperceptions. Instead of offering a mere corrective to racist views of blackness, culturally authentic black literature must offer a distinctive vision of African-American experience.

Rudine Sims differentiates what she describes as authentic, "culturally conscious" black children's literature from both "social conscience" literature and "melting pot" literature. For the most part written by white authors, social conscience books were produced primarily for white children and were intended to raise their awareness about racial issues such as school desegregation. Available since the fifties, if not earlier, but tapering off by the end of the sixties, social conscience books were highly moralistic teaching tools used to instill empathy and tolerance in children. Yet insofar as these books treated blackness in deficit terms and placed black characters in the passive position of victims waiting to be saved, they contributed to the very worldview that they were meant to overthrow. Often contrived, illogical, implausible, and ethnocentric, the books also tended to be poorly written: even major characters were likely to be stereotypes and "undeveloped clichés" (18). Such books may be considered propaganda on several counts. In mainstream terms, they qualify as propaganda because, for the most part, they were formulaic, moralistic, "preachy" (30), and artistically mediocre. Although these characteristics certainly would qualify the social conscience books as propaganda on Locke's terms, even more important from a Lockean perspective is the books' attempt to redress racial bigotry by answering whites' perceptions of blackness as a

problem. As Sims puts it, the social conscience books permit racism "to be seen as 'the Black problem'" (27). In the very attempt to correct white bigotry, they accept the racist outlook as a point of departure.

Melting pot literature emerged more or less concurrently with the social conscience literature but continued to flourish through the late seventies and beyond. As the term suggests, melting pot literature is intended to take up universal themes applicable to children of all colors. In this regard, Sims says, the books are partially successful. "On some level, all good literature speaks to that which is universal in each of us, and to that degree the melting pot books can be considered good literature." Melting pot books also have been more successful than social conscience literature in avoiding the pitfalls of bad writing, negative imagery, clichéd characters, implausible plots, and preachiness. Their limitation lies in their narrowness: in order to focus on "recognizing our universality," the books "make a point of ignoring our differences." Ironically, they "ignore all differences *except* physical ones" (33). Although occasionally blackness is used to add drama to a story, for the most part "the fact that [the characters] are Black is irrelevant" (35). Thus, the writing rarely betrays any recognition of difference; it is only through the illustrations that the reader becomes aware that one or more characters are black. Most melting pot books, accordingly, are picture books, for "without the illustrations one would have no way of knowing that the story was about an Afro-American child" (33).

Melting pot authors avoid any obligation to include culturally specific details by "placing Black characters in situations external to home, family, and Black community." Although they include African-American characters, they avoid "providing the specific details

that suggest an awareness of sociocultural differences" between black and white children (37). The cost of this colorblindness is found in the books' "tunnel vision," which "permits only one part of the duality of growing up Afro-American" — namely, the "American" part — "to be seen at a time" (41). Indirectly, the books' textual colorblindness hints at the continuing assumption that difference is somehow bad. For all its intended embrace of universality, colorblindness suggests that colors other than white are somehow shameful. When physical descriptions, which normally are "part of character delineation" in stories, "are deliberately and systematically avoided in books featuring Blacks, the differences begin to lose their neutrality" (45). If it is politer to ignore racially-based differences, then it becomes apparent to the reader that the differences "signify something undesirable." As a result, African-American children become invisible all over again: "they are permitted to exist in books only so long as they conform to the norm of middle-class Euro-American social and cultural values and life experiences" (46).

Because it largely avoids acknowledging racial conflict, melting pot literature may seem unlikely to fall prey to any corrective temptations. Yet the very insistence on *not seeing* race (while at the same time attempting to be inclusive of all races) is implicitly a reaction to deficit constructions of blackness and brownness. Avoidance of racist tropes, when there is nothing to put in their place, becomes a form of propaganda. For all their proclaimed innocence of any political stance, colorblind and assimilationist ideologies are framed specifically as rejoinders to deficit constructions of color.

From a Lockean perspective, the chief limitation of melting pot books is that, for the most part, they fail to express a *distinctive* artistic vision. In accepting non-whites as "just

like" whites, colorblind and assimilationist ideologies fail to offer any appreciation of other races and ethnic groups on their own terms. Invoking Virginia Hamilton, Sims emphasizes the importance of the writer bringing a unique personal and cultural perspective to bear. If, as Hamilton says, "The writer will always attempt to tell stories no one else can tell" (quoted in Sims 13), children's literature will be art only if it expresses experience in a fresh way, neither conforming to some ready-made principle (such as colorblindness) nor serving merely to answer and correct the misperceptions of others. The difficulty with a white writer "tell[ing] a fictional 'growing up' story from the point of view of a Black child at the center of an Afro-American family," Sims points out, is that it is unlikely "to be a story that no one else can tell, a story that is derived from what the writer has 'dared to live'" (13).

While white children's book authors have written successful melting pot books focusing on the commonalities between whites and blacks, Sims argues that white authors' attempts to write about African Americans steeped in black culture may be betrayed by the very details that they use "to convince us of the truth of their vision of Afro-American life." The choice of details will often reveal "an outsider's perspective" (13). For example, anyone who has seen a ghetto, as Sims points out, can accurately describe some of the details. But the details seen by a visitor will not be the same details with the same "nuances apparent to those who call the ghetto home." Without necessarily committing errors, such "books miss out on the essence" (65). In the phrase of my colleague, Georgia Johnson, outsider books "put the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLAble." By contrast, culturally conscious black children's literature "confirms for others what they, too, have perceived and understood," says Sims. "The writer-witness translates and transforms reality, and then holds the result up for other

witnesses to confirm" (79).

Because it is concerned with "chang[ing] the world . . . by creating truer images of Afro-Americans" (Sims 79), culturally conscious children's literature may look propagandist from a mainstream perspective. Indeed, Elaine Moss characterizes American activists' concern with anti-racist and non-sexist children's books as "pre-fab politikidlit." The notion of anti-sexist or anti-racist *guidelines* for children's literature is particularly troubling to her, seeming to suggest activists' preoccupation with "sociological content" over "the beauty of a language they seek to put in splints" (54). John Rowe Townsend, too, although he acknowledges that it is natural for decent people "to welcome books that give [racial discrimination] short shrift," argues that the political attitudes of authors cannot be a *standard* to which we hold books.

> To assess books on their racial attitude rather than their literary value, and still more to look on books as ammunition in the battle, is to take a further and still more dangerous step from literature-as-morality to literature-as-propaganda (164).

To some extent, Sims shares this view. "In general," she says, "books written to promote racial harmony" — that is, social conscience books — "are flawed" because "they are overwhelmed by their social purpose, and too often view their Afro-American subjects from some lofty height, as the instruments for the moral salvation of their protagonists" (104). Unlike Moss and Townsend, however, she does not assume that melting pot books and all-white children's classics are pure imaginative play, untouched by any shadow of propaganda. Indeed, children's books that are lauded for their universal appeal often function as subtle (or not-so-subtle) propaganda for whiteness, for empire, for patriarchy, or for hierarchical class

relations. Accordingly, Sims accepts Moss's and Townsend's insistence on literary artistry but adds cultural consciousness as a standard. *First*, she asks whether the book is artful and well-written; *then* she asks whether it is addressed to African-American children and adopts a perspective rooted in black experience. "The best books for or about Afro-American children must be both well written and sensitive to cultural and social realities" (18). Not only must black children's literature be beautiful, but it must tell the truth.

African-American Children's Books since the Harlem Renaissance

In calling for authentic black art untainted by propaganda, Alain Locke offered a challenge to W. E. B. Du Bois and other black leaders who insisted on uplifting, genteel images of blackness. Although he had originally taken a position against racial propaganda, Du Bois changed his mind after reading Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro*. If artists and intellectuals were to have the desired effect on public opinion, Du Bois decided, they would need to focus their attention on decency rather than decadence in the black community — and, for Du Bois, this meant focusing on the respectable black middle class. In a speech later reprinted in the October 1926 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois issued his much-quoted statement on the art/propaganda debate that framed the 1920s. "All art is propaganda and ever must be," Du Bois declared (323), adding that he did "not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" (324). Because propaganda had until now been "confined to one side while the other [was] stripped and silent," Du Bois believed that the art of the Harlem Renaissance would have to be enlisted to help enable African Americans to enjoy the same rights as any other Americans. Locke's approach, in Du Bois's view, catered to the white taste for black "monstrosities" in art, further confirming white prejudice (324).

As a self-proclaimed proponent of racial "propaganda," W. E. B. Du Bois was to have a profound influence on the new body of black children's literature that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. Together with Augustus Granville Dill, Du Bois founded *The Brownies' Book*, a children's magazine intended to replace racist stereotypes of blackness with positive imagery.[7] With the 1996 publication of Dianne Johnson-Feelings' edited collection, *The Best of the Brownies' Book*, the impressive cultural achievements of *The Brownies' Book* can be appreciated by a contemporary audience. As the collection reveals, *The Brownies' Book* featured poems, short stories, biographies, folk and fairy tales, games, letters, and discussions of current events, as well as drawings, paintings, and photographs of African-American adults and children. The illustrations give *The Brownies' Book* a distinctive look, mirroring the richness and diversity to be found in the written material. Photographs abound, including images of heroic individuals, sports teams, individual children, and pairs or groups of children. The titles are often decorated, and the illustrations accompanying the texts give a sense of the genre involved: folk tales, for example, are illustrated in a distinctive style that not only differentiates them from the non-fiction pieces and the poetry but also distinguishes them from fairy tales and realistic fiction. Some of the illustrations — particularly for the biographies — are reproductions of old woodcuts. Of the illustrations accompanying the fiction and poetry, several are more or less typical of realistic, children's book line drawings of the era, while other, more stylized and fantastic illustrations are rendered in the Art Nouveau fashion, with Art Deco making its mark in a few places. Some drawings take the form of silhouettes, a few illustrations are lushly detailed, sentimental paintings, while others are humorous, Thurber-like sketches. Although unfortunately *The Best of the Brownies' Book*

neither comments on nor lists the illustrators who contributed to *The Brownies' Book*, most can be identified, including Hilda Rue Wilkinson, Albert Alex Smith, Laura Wheeler, Frank Walts, and Marcellus Hawkins.[8]

Despite the small number of artists involved, the work represented is quite versatile, the range of pictorial styles and pictorial content testifying to the richness and diversity of material considered suitable for black children. This versatility is underscored by contrasting *The Brownies' Book* with *Floyd's Flowers*, published less than two decades earlier. Whereas *The Brownies' Book* has the bountiful, cultivated profusion of an English garden, *Floyd's Flowers* is uniform in both textual and pictorial content. The line illustrations accompanying the stories in *Floyd's Flowers*, all by John Henry Adams (ambitiously described as "second only to Tanner"), are realistic "rough sketches" (7) of the kind commonly found in newspapers and magazines at the turn of the century. Like Silas Floyd's stories, they do not vary much in tone, their purpose being to represent African Americans more or less realistically and respectably, rather than to engage children's imagination or artistic sensibility. By contrast, the images in *The Brownies' Book* reveal a much richer conceptualization of childhood, portraying children in variously realistic, romantic, humorous, and fantastic styles. While all the imagery conforms to a middle-class model, *The Brownies' Book* introduces a sophisticated range of representation within that model, setting the groundwork for the multiplicity of artistic styles found in both the melting pot and the culturally conscious children's books that were to appear many decades later.[9]

Summarizing the project undertaken in *The Brownies' Book*, Dianne Johnson-Feelings calls it "an experiment in pedagogy and propaganda aimed at African-American youth,"

although she adds that the magazine was also intended to entertain children (336). While seeking "to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk," *The Brownies' Book* had several aims specific to African-American children:

> (a) To make colored children realize that being "colored" is a normal beautiful thing.
> (b) To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race.
> (c) To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons.
> (d) To teach them delicately a code of honor and action in their relations with white children (337).[10]

"Stated in explicitly racial terms," the editors' objectives for *The Brownies' Book* reflect the racial reality confronting African-American children. Even those objectives that "do not mention race explicitly," Johnson-Feelings observes, "have racial undertones" (338).

Similarly, most of the pieces published in *The Brownies' Book* have racial undertones, although when taken individually some of them may appear assimilationist or colorblind. It should be remembered, however, that the stories in which black children were treated in more or less culturally neutral terms (as generic children whose ethnicity is known only through the illustrations), always appeared in the context of a variety of more explicitly racialized writing. Given the many pieces in the magazine that overtly foreground black issues, the stories and poems that treat black children simply as children have an impact rather different from the assimilationist, melting pot literature that was to flourish half a century later. The "normalization" of contemporary African-American childhood in *The Brownies' Book* fiction was always contextualized by historical, political, and moralistic essays, for the non-fiction pieces in the magazine systematically foregrounded and celebrated blackness.

Combining straightforward information with editorial commentary, the non-fiction writing in *The Brownies' Book* was intended to connect the stories of famous people with the children reading the biographies. Almost invariably, these stories pointed to the progress that had been made over the past century — in part due to the famous African-American figures under discussion. In "The Story of Phillis Wheatley," for example, readers were asked to "picture [Phillis's] fear and anguish" when, as a child of six or seven in Africa, she was "torn away from everything and everybody whom she had ever known, on her way to a strange land full of queer looking people who were going to subject her to she knew not what experiences and hardships" (72). But the story ended on a note of progress: "the first Negro in America to win prestige for purely intellectual attainments," Phillis Wheatley "influenced and strengthened anti-slavery feeling." In the *Lift Every Voice and Sing* tradition, the story also testified to the importance of each individual African-American voice, telling the reader that, most importantly, Phillis Wheatley gave "voice to her precious dower of song, even though she had to express it in a far country and a stranger's tongue" (75).

Although the fiction, poetry, and holiday pieces in *The Brownies' Book* were not always as specific to black experience as were the historical pieces, they too focused to an important degree on black experience. Even occasional race-generic pieces like "St. Valentine's Day," which might just as easily have appeared in a white magazine, were accompanied by lighthearted pictures of black children. And while "St. Patrick's Day" focused on the legend of a white saint and was accompanied by white-appearing decorations, in telling the story of an Irish child who was enslaved at the age of sixteen and who protected himself through magic, it offered an implicit connection to many African-American tales

regarding both slavery and magic. Similarly, a number of the apparently universal contemporary stories and poems of childhood suggested a black dimension to childhood. Without necessarily mentioning blackness, such stories — because they were illustrated with engaging pictures of black children — provided black children with the chance to enjoy stories and poems that neither excluded them nor mocked them. Playing down black culture and politics, much of the fiction and poetry in the magazine simply placed black children at the center of childhood. In taking the children's beauty and intelligence for granted, the stories and poems addressed black children as just like other children.

Other stories in *The Brownies' Book* were more specific to the experience of African-American children. In "Why Bennie Was Fired," for instance, we learn about Bennie, "a little colored girl eleven years old" who went to work for "Mrs. Blair, a white lady," at 6:00 every morning before school (142). While the racial and cultural themes in this story are not particularly stressed, they are clearly present. Still other contemporary fiction, folk tales, and fairy tales published in the magazine overtly celebrated blackness. "Polly Sits Tight," for example, is offered as an uplifting essay about "a little black girl with stubborn hair and a voice like a lilting melody." Overcoming her embarrassment at having to wear her mother's shoes "until someone gave her a pair or until she could save up enough to buy her own" (166), Polly strides boldly to the front of the classroom to write on the board when she knows the answer to the teacher's question. "And not one person saw her shoes! They just saw a black girl with beaming face . . . demonstrate the solution of the problem that had baffled them all" (167). Although in such cases the fiction in *The Brownies' Book* was explicitly didactic, for the most part the lessons the magazine imparted depended on the juxtaposition of

overt, didactic political commentary in the non-fiction pieces with fiction that simply avoided negative stereotypes and racial marginalization.

To some extent, this avoidance of the prevailing racist discourse may have allowed *The Brownies' Book* to celebrate blackness on its own terms; yet the magazine also tended to invoke a universal conception of childhood, more or less assimilating the experience of black children to a colorblind, middle-class ideal. Whereas Locke regarded art as lending itself to a celebration of cultural pluralism, the realistic fiction in *The Brownies' Book* for the most part reflects the genteel, middle-class, literary construction of blackness that Du Bois and Fauset favored and for which they were often criticized. In providing highly moral but also playful, "universally" childlike characterizations of black children, the realistic stories in *The Brownies' Book* might be said to normalize blackness — that is, they were meant to counter both the invisibility of blacks in mainstream children's literature and the denigration of blacks in the rest of the culture, by matter-of-factly showing black children acting in ways that, in the mainstream culture, were associated with white children. Insofar as such stories offered an implicit corrective to prevailing views rather than a distinctively new artistic vision, they represented propaganda in Locke's sense of the term.

After publication of *The Brownies' Book* ceased — a total of twenty-four issues had been produced between January 1920 and December 1921 — some of the writers and artists who had done work for *The Brownies' Book*, along with other Harlem Renaissance artists and writers, went on to publish further work for children. Mainstream children's books by black authors, however, were likely to be white-washed to some degree. In some cases, black authors' and illustrators' work was edited to conform to mainstream racial ideology. Several

of Langston Hughes's books suffered editorial censorship to make them either more colorblind or more exotically black.[11] At times, black authors also practiced self-censorship to attract mainstream publishers. In writing *Popo and Fifina*, for example, Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes had to suppress any criticism of white colonialism in Haiti. Arnold Rampersad calls the result a "dignified, moral picture of black Haitians" that, in the context of the thirties, makes "a bold statement about race and culture" (109). He points out, however, that the authors' decision to focus almost exclusively on the experience of black Haitians precludes the possibility of readers responding with the outrage at Haitian poverty that narrative "comparisons to [white] wealth inevitably would have brought" (107).

Other black authors seem to have accepted mainstream ideas of race relations sufficiently to write books that would be attractive to liberal, white publishers.[12] Ellen Tarry's *Hezekiah Horton*, for example, is about a little African-American boy who gets the thrill of his life when a nice white man takes him for a ride in his beautiful red automobile. In some respects an example of social conscience fiction — fiction that embraces a white, liberal view of racial tolerance — *Hezekiah Horton* more or less conformed to prevailing white, primitivist conceptions of blackness. In Oliver Harrington's illustrations, the two main characters, Hezekiah and Mr. Ed, appear to have stepped out of entirely different pictorial traditions. Whereas the white man is rendered in conventional, dignified lines that might have appeared in any mainstream magazine or children's book of the time, Hezekiah, who is drawn with exaggerated cuteness, has big black button eyes like a teddy bear. The story's implicitly white perspective is also reflected in the drawings of Mr. Ed's car. Although the book is in some sense *about* the wonderful red automobile — Hezekiah's love for it and the black community's

fascination with it — the car itself is merely sketched in. Given that, in the illustrations, the car does not draw the reader's own attention, the black community's interest in the car is made to seem more a comment about that community than about the car. In terms remarkably parallel to the anthropological stereotype of white explorers penetrating "primitive" societies with their cameras and typewriters, Mr. Ed's arrival in the neighborhood with his fancy car is rendered as a wonderfully exotic happening for black adults and children alike. As Mr. Ed drives Hezekiah and several other little the boys around the block, the whole neighborhood turns out to watch in amazement. The story ends with Mr. Ed promising Hezekiah that, when he is old enough, he can be Mr. Ed's chauffeur.[13]

When mainstream publishers produced books by or for African Americans — and these were few indeed — they were likely to defer to prevailing racial stereotypes. Publishers outside the mainstream were less cautious. Of particular importance was Carter G. Woodson's Associated Publishers, the publishing arm of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, which produced "a significant number of folklore collections, biographies, poetry anthologies, and histories explicitly designed to educate, entertain, and emancipate."[14] Among the books that the press published for young African Americans were Gertrude Parthenia McBrown's *The Picture-Poetry Book* (1935), Jane D. Shackelford's reader, *The Child's Story of the Negro* (1938), and Woodson's own *African Myths* (1928), *The Story of the Negro Retold* (1935), and *Negro Makers of History* (1928). Surprisingly, some of the books that Woodson's press published — such as Shackelford's reader — were pallid, even Eurocentric, in their presentation of racial material. More interesting than the written text, in many cases, were the illustrations. Several of the Associated Publishers' books for children —

including McBrown's *Picture-Poetry Book*, Shackelford's *Child's Story of the Negro*, and Woodson's *African Heroes and Heroines*, among others — were illustrated by Loïs Mailou Jones, whose work shows the influence of Aaron Douglas, Winold Reiss, Meta Warrick Fuller, and other pioneers in culturally conscious black imagery.

Despite the work of a handful of black authors and illustrators, literature for black children was almost non-existent in the decades that followed the demise of *The Brownies' Book*. Into this near-void stepped Arna Bontemps, who initially wrote "children's books with Negro characters and themes" to provide his own children with "something less damaging" than *The Pickaninny Twins*. "In the thirties, he had the field almost to himself," Dorothy Sterling tells us (167). Bontemps, whom Violet Harris calls "the contemporary 'father' of African American children's literature," wrote novels, biographies, and histories, and also published folktales and poetry anthologies. This "extensive body of work over two generations . . . no doubt helped propel African American children's literature into the mainstream" (548).

In the forties, Bontemps was followed by Shirley Graham, who in 1947 "won an award for the 'best book combatting intolerance in America' with *There Was Once a Slave*," a biography of Frederick Douglass (Sterling, 167). Graham published biographies about historic black figures for both children and adults, including biographies of Benjamin Banneker, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and her husband, W. E. B. Du Bois.[15] Like Bontemps, Graham made a significant contribution to African-American children's literature at a time when a black perspective in either fiction or non-fiction was almost non-existent. Indeed, Sterling recalls that a young African-American friend, "listening to a radio

adaptation" of Graham's *Story of Phillis Wheatley*, "burst into tears during the program. 'Why didn't somebody tell me about this?' she sobbed" (168).

Although the fifties saw a small number of other children's book authors (including Sterling, a white children's book author) addressing black themes, some of these books perpetuated the racist outlook of previous years. In any case, the "flurry of interest in books about Negroes" after *Brown v. Board of Education* "didn't last long," Sterling recalls (168), for it was followed by a backlash from the South. The backlash had lasting effects. By the mid to late sixties, "only 2.8 per cent" of children's books and books for young adults were "concerned with the most burning issues of our time" (172). Even setting aside the question of culturally relevant topics, the representation of blacks in children's books was poor. In 1965, Nancy Larrick pointed out that less than seven percent of the 5,206 children's books published in the previous three years had included even one black child in either the text or the illustrations — and that black children continued to be depicted in terms of negative stereotypes. A decade later, the percentage of children's books including at least one black child had doubled: 14.4 percent of the children's books that Jeanne Chall, Eugene Radwin, Valarie French, and Cynthia Hall examined included one or more black children in the text or illustrations.[16] It was not clear, however, that the quality of the books was much improved. Chall et al. reported that many stereotypes remained in place: for example, the majority of biographies focusing on African Americans concerned "sports figures and popular entertainers" (531) and emphasized athletes' "exuberance and joyfulness without also including their serious competitiveness" (531–532). History books, too, continued to circulate stereotypes. One showed black slaves "as ever high-spirited, smiling, and fun loving" (531),

and even "a book designed to dispel the myths of American history seemed to perpetuate some itself in its neglect of Black participation" in various aspects of American history (532).

Like Sterling, Larrick, and Chall et al., critics such as Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, Dorothy Broderick, and Rudine Sims have testified that the increased representation of blacks in mainstream children's literature towards the end of the sixties did not signal any real progress in the *way* that African Americans were portrayed in that literature. "While the plantation stereotypes of an older era had, for the most part, disappeared, they had been replaced by such newer stereotypes as the Black matriarchal family and the Super Negro," Sims explains. Such books either "presented paternalistic white characters solving problems for docile, subservient Black children," offered inaccurate, white-referenced "portraits of Black life-styles" and families, or ignored the multiplicity of African-American experience in favor of "positive Black images" modelled exclusively on white, middle-class experience (5).

Since the seventies, however, culturally conscious children's literature has begun to make a significant impact, not only in the area of young adult fiction (where Sims, writing in 1982, saw it as most concentrated) but, increasingly, in picture books, including non-fiction picture books. In considering the changes that have taken place in black children's literature over the course of the twentieth century, it is instructive to compare Floyd's "Benjamin Banneker, the Negro Astronomer" and Elizabeth Ross Haynes's "Benjamin Banneker," published in *The Brownies' Book*, with the Pinkneys' culturally conscious *Dear Benjamin Banneker*, which was published almost ninety years after *Floyd's Flowers*.

Floyd's 1905 account of Banneker is actually taken from an essay written by a white man in the January 1863 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and is offered to the reader as

especially objective *because* it is written by a white man. Clearly abolitionist in intent ("There was not a drop of white man's blood in his veins. . . . What genius he had, then, must be credited to [the African] race" [254]), the essay celebrates Banneker's scientific prowess as evidence of the innate intelligence of African Americans. Although a dramatic highlight of the essay is the letter in which Thomas Jefferson praised Banneker for his almanac, the essay fails to mention that when Banneker first contacted Jefferson, he called him to account for his racism.[17] The *Atlantic Monthly*/*Floyd's Flowers* version tells us only that Thomas Jefferson wrote Banneker "a most flattering and complimentary letter" (257), without telling us what, apart from the gift of Banneker's almanac, had occasioned the letter. Despite its abolitionist intent, then, the essay stops short of problematizing the slaveholding practices of the white founding fathers.

Haynes's version of the Banneker story, written in the early twenties, is equally unforthcoming with regard to the Banneker/Jefferson exchange. While Haynes quotes from Jefferson's letter to Banneker, she offers no comment on it, preferring to elaborate on miscellaneous facts such as what Banneker stashed in his feather bed ("a purse of money") (p. 70) and the availability of liquor. In contrast to Floyd's version of the story, which makes no concessions to presumptively childish interests in such details, Haynes's version focuses almost entirely on random details. Worse, Haynes writes down to children, giving as much if not more space to "cute" episodes and pointless elaborations as she does to Banneker's accomplishments. One paragraph in the Haynes story, for example, explains that "Benjamin Banneker did retire for the night but he did not sleep for twenty years like Rip Van Winkle. He rose the next morning" (67). Apparently the author assumes that sleeping through a single

night instead of sleeping for twenty years requires an explanation. By-the-way moralizing also makes an appearance: "On his return home he told his friends that during that trip he had not touched strong drink, his one temptation" (69).

Although meant to appeal to a child's interest in homey details, the *Brownies' Book* version of the biography is actually less satisfying than the *Atlantic Monthly* account that Floyd reprinted, for Haynes's rambling story offers little real sense of Banneker's scientific or mathematical importance. Whereas for Floyd the instructive and uplifting character of the narrative makes it inherently suitable for children (although it is obvious that the original account was written for adults), for Haynes the story becomes suitable for children only insofar as it filled with improving or dramatic — even if dramatically irrelevant — details. The most engaging aspect of *The Brownies' Book* version of Banneker's life is Albert Alex Smith's black and white illustration showing Banneker gazing up at the night sky. Perhaps picking up on Haynes's comment in passing that Banneker was a "strange man," Smith has rendered his image in the eerie, fairy tale style of Arthur Rackham. Although not particularly suggestive of any scientific powers on Banneker's part, it does evoke the dreaminess and the vision that drove him to do his work.

Brian Pinkney's picture of Banneker gazing up at the night sky, reminiscent of Van Gogh's "Starry Night" paintings, also has some of this visionary quality. Most of the other scratchboard and oil illustrations in *Dear Benjamin Banneker*, however, are rendered in a cross between Currier and Ives-style realism and a rougher folk style that effectively suggests everyday life in the colonial and revolutionary era. Visually, *Dear Benjamin Banneker* focuses more on the historical setting than on the inner man. In contrast to Floyd's

biographical account, which frames Banneker's life as the story of a self-made black man (underscoring the fact that he was not beholden to white educators), the Pinkneys' version of the story offers children more historical and biographical context and couches the personal biography in the larger narrative of a free black man struggling against the racism of the colonial and revolutionary era. Like the earlier versions of the story, Andrea Davis Pinkney's version quotes Jefferson's letter to Banneker. Unlike those earlier versions, however, she also quotes material from the letter that Banneker first wrote to Jefferson, challenging him for his "criminal act" in "detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my bretheren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression." Rather than attempting to answer the racist charge that blacks are less than human, as Floyd's borrowed account does, the Pinkneys' version goes on the offensive. Implicitly framed by Banneker's challenge to Jefferson, *Dear Benjamin Banneker* contrasts the myth of white revolutionary idealism with the actual experience of a free black man of the period — while also reminding us that most blacks were not free.

In Locke's terms, Floyd's "Benjamin Banneker, the Negro Astronomer" is propaganda, for it takes as its starting point the argument that blacks are inferior to whites and attempts to disprove the charges. The very defensiveness of the stance adopted suggests that some credence might be given to racist arguments. While Elizabeth Ross Haynes's "Benjamin Banneker" avoids any kind of defensiveness, it also neglects the historical context and glides over questions of racism. We are told, for example, that Banneker's "first almanac was published for the year 1792" and that the "two almanac publishers of Baltimore" to whom he wrote about it "gladly published" it (68). Far more specific about the racism that Banneker faced, Andrea Davis Pinkney's account reports that Baltimore publishers had rejected

Banneker's almanac for 1791, and that it was only when abolitionist societies rallied round that a publisher was found. Because it was by then too late to publish a 1791 almanac, Banneker had to begin all over again with calculations for 1792. The indifference to social context in Haynes's "Benjamin Banneker" evokes the race-blindness of what Sims calls melting pot children's literature. Although Haynes's story is not propaganda, it is also not art. More than anything else, its fragmentary, decontextualized and mystified character suggests a contemporary history textbook.[18] Less satisfying than the propagandist account of Banneker's story in *Floyd's Flowers*, and uninformed by any independent artistic vision, the version of Banneker's life in *The Brownies' Book* offers readers only a random series of facts.

Dear Benjamin Banneker, by contrast, expresses a culturally distinctive vision of experience and sets its own terms for meaning-making, thus qualifying it as art in Locke's sense of the term. Although meant in part to set the record straight — and to that degree propagandist — *Dear Benjamin Banneker* is also a fresh look at a somewhat obscure historical figure. If it suffers by comparison with such outstanding picture-book biographies as Alan Schroeder's and Jerry Pinkney's *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* and Jacob Lawrence's *Harriet and the Promised Land*, it nevertheless engages readers on terms that are not simply borrowed from the dominant social order. While not so richly imagined as to be likely to command an enduring audience, it offers readers an account of Benjamin Banneker that has its own integrity.

Art and Propaganda in Faith Ringgold's *The Invisible Princess*

The Lockean challenge for African-American children's book authors is to craft stories and pictures that are neither derivative nor defensive, books that work against the grain of

racist ideology without having to work *within* the terms set by that ideology. Echoing Locke's argument that black artists need to represent black experience independently of the prevailing norms of whiteness and blackness, Ringgold writes, "When you do a lot with white . . . you may lose your sensitivity to other colors. The white gathers the light." Moving away from artistic conventions that privilege whiteness, Ringgold developed the flat painterly style that has sometimes been mis-characterized as "naïve." Her interest in that style, she explains, has to do with shedding new light on blackness. Black art must *use* black to "create its own light," says Ringgold. It cannot "depend on lights or light contrast in order to express its blackness, either in principle or in fact."[19]

Metaphorically, as well as literally, Ringgold seeks a transformative approach to understanding blackness, an approach that draws on both the most beautiful and "the ugliest form[s] of light" to reimagine experience. Returning to *The Invisible Princess* allows us to examine how, in using a familiar genre but an "ugly" setting usually avoided in children's books, Ringgold turns "the worst kind of situation" into something beautiful. The point is not whether *The Invisible Princess* is art in the honorific sense — great Art with a capital A — but whether a fairy tale set in slavery can be art in Locke's sense: whether it can set forth an alternative vision with its own integrity, and if so, how it avoids taking its cue from the racist ideology it rejects.

Framed in the language of magic, past, and possibility, *The Invisible Princess* is cast in the mold of a more or less traditional Western fairy tale. Among the recognizable elements of the fairy tale genre are the beautiful princess, the blind girl who cannot see her father but can see the truth, the threat of evil embodied in a wicked tyrant (the blind, white girl's father),

fairy godparents (albeit in an unfamiliar form), magic, and a happy ending in which the wicked slavemaster repents and is taken up into the beautiful, invisible kingdom. Despite the weight of slave history in the story's setting, the story has a light touch, borrowed from a genre in which themes of good versus evil, unfairness and exploitation, and secret goodness versus pretended worthiness are already part of the stock in trade.

As in *Sleeping Beauty*, the story starts with the expectation of a birth. Threatened by great evil towards their baby — in this case, slavery — the loving parents of the princess call upon a fairy godmother to protect their child. The fairy godmother (the Great Lady of Peace) protects the child by rendering her invisible. Although the princess's invisibility keeps her safe over the years, it also exacts a cost. Like Sleeping Beauty, the Invisible Princess is trapped in a kind of hibernation, waiting to be welcomed back into the arms of her family and community. The rescue, in Ringgold's story, is initiated not by a handsome prince (although the story does feature a dark, handsome prince in the form of a fairy godfather), but by a blind, white girl called Patience, the daughter of the evil slaveholder, Captain Pepper. Eschewing the heterosexual redemption narrative construction of traditional fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty* (or *The Little Mermaid* or *Snow White* or *Cinderella* or . . .), in which a passive princess is rescued by an admiring hero, *The Invisible Princess* features a more dialectical set of relationships in which a beautiful, cherished ghost of a little girl (reminiscent of the ghost-daughter in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) is reunited with her family by another little girl. This second child, in turn, gains a new relationship with her repentant father when, after a separation, she is reunited with him.

In treating the "long ago" story of slavery and oppression as the basis for a more or

less traditional Western fairy tale, *The Invisible Princess* not only renders the history of slavery visible to children, but transforms the very genre of the fairy tale as it has come to be known in the West. The conventional Western fairy tale universalizes themes of apparent goodness that masks actual evil (beautiful but wicked stepmothers); true goodness and nobility rendered invisible by poverty, oppression, magic, or surface ugliness (crones, frogs, tramps); temptations to and triumphs over evil; and transformation and redemption through a journey of discovery. According to the "universal" interpretation, such themes take no account of race or color; they are simply human. In historicizing these themes, Ringgold's treatment reveals their cultural particularity. Putting slavery at the center of the story undercuts the class and race bias in traditional fairy tale treatments.

Consider how the Invisible Princess differs from Cinderella as a heroine, for example. Like many heroines in Western fairy tales, Cinderella is an aristocrat in disguise. Indeed, the drama and romance in *Cinderella* depend upon the reader accepting the downtrodden, exploited servant girl as the legitimate heir to her father's money and status: our outrage at her being made a servant is not outrage at the idea that anyone should be reduced to servant status but rather a response to Cinderella's loss of property and status in her own house. Morally speaking, to be sure, her nobility is not tied to her possessions: the reader is meant to see that true nobleness of character emerges under duress. Nevertheless, the character is deemed deserving because she is *supposed* to be wealthy and privileged — and in the end her rightful status is restored to her. Even alternative versions of Cinderella, such as Robert San Souci's and Brian Pinkney's *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella* (which is loosely based on the French Creole version of Perrault's Cinderella) position her as an aristocrat wrongly

forced to work as a servant. Whereas Cendrillon eventually is restored to wealth and position, her godmother, a poor washerwoman, has no prospect of improving her own life; her magic wand can be used only to help Cendrillon catch the prince-like Paul Thibault. There is no question, then, of real servants changing position.

By contrast, the Invisible Princess is not of a different class or rank from the people who call her princess. There is no suggestion that she is better than others or that her birth confers particular rights on her (other than the natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that the world denies her). She is a princess simply because she is loved and because she is heir to a particular culture and history. Her drama lies not in being a princess but in being invisible.

Ringgold's story also diverges from the fairy tale convention according to which female beauty is inseparable from helplessness. In traditional Western fairy tales (as retold and repackaged for modern ears), girls and women are usually "heroines" in the sense that they are the focus of the story, the center of attention — what the story purportedly is *about* — but not in the sense that they actually *do* anything. Damsels in distress, they wait to be rescued by the hero. The Invisible Princess, however, is no passive object of admiration, and the story is not about her rescue so much as it is about her *rescuing* the entire community to which she belongs. Even as she is brought back into the fold of her extended family, the Invisible Princess and her fairy godparents work to bring her family and community into a better world, uplifted "up, up, up above the jet-black clouds of night into the Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom, and Love." Patience, the little girl symbolically blinded by her whiteness — yet also freed by her literal blindness to see the invisible beauty of the young princess — is taken

up into this better world with the princess. In the end, her slaveholding father joins them, renouncing his hold over others in order to be reunited with his daughter.

In addition to undercutting the class bias in the traditionally conceived Western fairy tale, then, Ringgold undercuts its gender bias. Although the "princess" theme no doubt caters to conventionally feminine aspirations to princesshood, Ringgold's story is a far less girly kind of story than are most mainstream stories about princesses. For one thing, the Invisible Princess — being invisible — does not depend on appearances to persuade people that she is lovable and worthwhile. For another, she is not dependent on coincidence for change. The conventional feminine drama, as Bobbie Ann Mason has observed, is heavily reliant on coincidence and waiting: with luck, a girl will be in the right place at the right time when Mr. Right walks in the room and, seeing her, comes to claim her. The Invisible Princess, however, does not need a prince to rescue her. Given *why* she has been forced to live her life invisibly — due not to malicious chance but to the very structures of race and class in a racist, classist society — it would not be possible for someone to rescue her, for she can only be saved if her people are saved. In a conventional, colorblind Western story, the girl can always be plucked from obscurity and raised above her class origins, but in the tradition of the African-American community, uplift means bringing your people with you.[20]

Abandoning the romance-based, heterosexual "rescue" thematic according to which the prince chooses the princess and thereby saves her, Ringgold turns to friendship between two girls as a basis for moral and political agency. Together, the invisible black princess and the blind, white daughter of a plantation owner form a political coalition that gives them enough power to call upon magic to save a family and a people. Since the invisibility of the princess

makes Patience's blindness moot, while the latter's blindness makes the Princess's invisibility moot, they form a natural team. Significantly, their team work means that "rescue" itself as a thematic is foresworn. Whereas in social conscience literature the white child rescues the black child while the latter stands by, passively and gratefully, in *The Invisible Princess* neither child is responsible for the other. Indeed, their individual powers are limited. Higher spiritual powers ("the Great Powers of Nature") effect the actual change, but the little girls do the necessary organizing and dissemination of information. Thus, although the transformation theme is tied to friendship, Ringgold avoids the common good-versus-bad-whites theme found in many white stories about blacks' escape from slavery. What animates the little white girl's response to the Invisible Princess is not that she herself is "good," but that she can see what her father cannot see — and acts accordingly, even at some risk to herself, and despite her father's overt disapproval.

In *The Invisible Princess*, the blindness of the little white girl is a metaphor not for colorblindness but for *another* way of seeing — a metaphor for appreciation, connection, and response. Similarly, much of the more recent African-American children's literature offers a new way of seeing, new possibilities for appreciation. Illustrations play an integral role in this new way of seeing. In *The Invisible Princess*, as in *Tar Beach*, the images teach us to see beauty where the artist has seen it. In the antebellum literature, of course, beauty lay in the graceful architecture, lush landscapes, and gracious lifestyle of the plantation class. Such a scene is depicted in *The Invisible Princess*, but it holds no charm for the viewer. The white ladies in their fine clothes and parasols, the spreading lawn, and the columned mansion are merely scribbled into place; undeveloped, even perfunctory, these conventional markers of

beauty appear flat, pallid, and uninteresting. As they hold no beauty for the artist they can hold no interest for us.

The visual heart of *The Invisible Princess* is the beautiful black princess, her hair aglow as if lit by a halo. Though angelic in appearance, she is still clearly a little girl, and her beauty outshines that of all the other characters, including the mighty powers of nature that gather to protect her. Her own power is suggested by her bright red and yellow dress and pantaloons — this is no fragile princess in high heels, pink and white lace, and a jeweled crown. This is a child of the sun, cousin to the black, red, and yellow bees whose honey helps to keep the princess invisible — and whose honey eventually allows all the slaves to enter the "Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom, and Love." The depth of the colors continually draws the reader's eyes to the princess; when she is missing from the page, the picture is almost always less beautiful.

Like Ringgold's first book, *Tar Beach*, *The Invisible Princess* alternates between night and day as central motifs. Although in some respects the treatment of darkness in *The Invisible Princess* is propagandist — for the book's valorization of blackness is clearly intended as a corrective to deficit constructions of blackness — it also goes beyond propaganda to imagine new meanings for blackness. As in *Tar Beach*, the night in *The Invisible Princess* is beautiful and mysterious, rich with power and possibility. In both books, darkness and night serve as metaphors for safety and comfort, a velvety caress and a promise of magic. In both books, too, night confers invisibility — darkness is the concealing cloak that allows for invisibility and escape. In *The Invisible Princess*, though, darkness is somewhat more ambiguous than in *Tar Beach*, for power here includes the threat of violence, whether in the

form of abusive treatment on the part of the slavemaster or in the form of rebellion on the part of the slaves. Night brings the promise of a storm — yet in that storm lies the possibility for change.

Although it does not have the poetic brilliance or compressed visual power of *Tar Beach*, Faith Ringgold's first book for children, *The Invisible Princess* returns us to some of the magic of that earlier book. If not great art, *The Invisible Princess* is nevertheless art in Locke's sense, in that it does not work within the prevailing discourse of racism to correct false images of racialized experience but offers a transforming vision of racial possibility. As in much of African-American children's literature, blackness here sheds its own light. It stands both for the child's own beauty as a child of the sun and for the protection of night, under which great changes may take place. "A great black cloak," black light makes reality — whether mundane or painful — disappear and allows magic possibility to take its place.

Conclusion

Yet however artful an anti-racist children's book may be, it cannot in and of itself deliver an anti-racist education or insure that readers set aside their racial self-consciousness. No book can do all the work of educating our understanding and imagination; among other reasons, we may have to learn *how* to read books that set new terms for understanding and appreciation. When Jacob Lawrence's richly imagined *Harriet and the Promised Land* was first published, for example, it met a storm of resistance from parents, teachers, and librarians who, because they read it within the terms of the dominant discourse, considered it racist. More recently, the uproar over *Nappy Hair* reminds us that there is no guarantee against a playful, celebratory book's being perceived as racist propaganda. Without community and

pedagogical support, even distinctly anti-racist books may have racist consequences. One of the lessons that white students in a Utah middle school recently took from their reading of a classic culturally conscious novel was that it was okay to call their black classmate "nigger." Although the teacher who assigned the novel seems to have had good intentions, she failed to teach the students *how* to read the book, apparently assuming that an anti-racist book automatically gives rise to anti-racist understanding.

Neither the artistic nor the political merits of a book guarantee its success in an anti-racist curriculum. Within the accepted terms of multiculturalism, *Nappy Hair*, for example, seems entirely unobjectionable. Written in African American Vernacular, in the rhythms of call and response, *Nappy Hair* is an extended, friendly tease of its heroine, a little girl with amazingly nappy hair. In the pictures, Brenda's hair billows out uncontrollably but splendidly. It's not just ordinarily nappy hair. Combing Brenda's hair, her Uncle Mordecai says, "is like scrunching through the New Mexico desert in brogans in the heat of summer." It's "the nappiest hair in the world." A gentle version of the dozens, *Nappy Hair* uses outlandish exaggeration to both tease Brenda and celebrate her. "It ain't easy to come by that kind of hair," her Uncle Mordecai tells her. Her hair is a legacy of Africa, but it is also determinedly individual. It's willful: "Your hair intended to be nappy." Illustrated with colorful, joyous paintings (in which it is clear that no one in Brenda's family has processed hair), *Nappy Hair* ought to be the obvious celebration of blackness that its author intended it to be. More than a tease, it is an allegory of resilience. No legacy of slavery, oppression, and segregation could tame that hair: "Wouldn't stop, wouldn't mix, wouldn't slow down for nobody." And it is a story of blessedness: "an act of God that came straight through Africa,"

for "God wanted hisself some nappy hair upon the face of the earth," and He himself insisted on giving it to "this sweet little brown baby girl chile." Brightly colored illustrations by Joe Cepeda show a confident little girl happy to be the center of attention of a loving family.

The African-American author of *Nappy Hair* — Carolivia Herron, an assistant professor of English at California State University at Chico — hoped that the book "would promote self-esteem and pride among black children." When a white teacher in Brooklyn used the book with her mostly African-American and Latina/o third-graders, however, some of the African-American parents were outraged. Part of their anger was based on the unappealing photocopies that the teacher had given the students in response to their eager requests to have copies of *Nappy Hair* for their own. According to one commentator, the photocopies made the illustrations look like "an Al Jolson depiction of blacks." Yet the problem was not simply a matter of misunderstanding. Even when the author personally explained the book (which is based on her own childhood), parents and other members of the community remained concerned, seeing the very word "nappy" as having negative connotations. Other objections centered on the book's use of African American Vernacular (not "proper English") and the treatment of both slavery ("vague") and religion ("simplistic").[21] The problem that both the author and the teacher encountered, Jill Nelson points out, lies not in the book but in the attitudes of its readers. "We live in a culture in which most women are fixated on hair, and it is generally held that long, straight hair is the most desirable." Straight hair is "'good,' nappy hair 'bad'" (54). "Inadvertently," Nelson suggests, this white teacher "exposed both the depth and absurdity of a race secret" (55) — the secret of internalized racism.

But of course this secret is not really a secret. White educators who step outside the

bounds of colorblindness, who study what blackness, brownness, and whiteness mean in a racist society, should not be surprised to learn that celebrations of blackness may be seen as celebrations of stereotypes. The burden imposed by racist stereotypes is suggested by an entry in *Black Misery*. "Misery," Langston Hughes wrote, "is when you learn that you are not supposed to like watermelon but you do." For African Americans, a taste for watermelon is not simply a matter of personal taste, as it is for whites, but a pleasure that feeds others' bigotry. In a racist society, *affirming* a taste for watermelon is never an unproblematic celebration, for it opens the possibility that what is being affirmed for whites is not the sweet taste of watermelon but the stereotype of blacks' craving for watermelon. In a racist society, it will not automatically be clear if a celebration of Black English is a caricature, if a celebration of black folk imagery betrays a white primitivist aesthetic, or if a celebration of nappy hair is bigoted.

One contribution that educational research can make is troubling white teachers' assumption that a well-intentioned book will not be offensive to people of color. Often there will be no easy answer to the question as to what is or is not an offensive racial stereotype. Teachers — black and brown as well as white — need to study the research that addresses issues within the communities with which they are involved. Such research cannot provide answers in advance, but it can sensitize educators to some of the issues that they need to consider. It also can help provide a context for deciding as to the appropriateness of particular books in the classroom. As Greg Sarris points out, teachers who undertake to use multicultural books in the classroom must be familiar with the culture to which the book speaks and must have a sense of how the students' community may view the book. Some

books may be valued in the community but be inappropriate for the classroom. If a book is to be used successfully in the classroom, teachers not only need to adopt a culturally appropriate pedagogy but must know how to present the books so that potentially problematic moments in the book are addressed and so that students have a context for responding to the book. With respect to *Nappy Hair*, for example, it might be helpful to discuss the politics of hair, introducing the book together with other books that take up similar themes but address them differently, such as Camille Yarbrough's *Cornrows*, Natasha Anastasia Tarpley's *I Love My Hair*, Nikki Grimes's *Wild, Wild Hair*, and Alexis De Veaux's *An Enchanted Hair Tale*.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers need to develop relationships with parents and with the local community so that other adults in the students' lives already know what is going in the classroom and do not feel assaulted by the unexpected. Teachers cannot simply take their cue from other teachers or from multicultural workshops, assuming that if a book comes highly recommended, it will work well in their own classroom. Because this particular teacher knew that her colleagues had used *Nappy Hair* with great success, she assumed that the book would pose no problems for the community. Such assumptions cannot safely be made, however, without some intimate knowledge of the community. Although that knowledge cannot guarantee success, the relationships on which it is founded may help to prevent the kind of uproar that took place in Brooklyn in response to *Nappy Hair*.

The lesson in the furor over this award-winning book is quite simple. No matter how delightful it may be and no matter how much children may love it, a book like *Nappy Hair* cannot be expected to eradicate racist attitudes by itself. Parents, religious leaders, teachers, commerce, television, the workplace, and the larger community all help to create the context

in which books have or make meaning. Racism is far too complex and engrained a part of our lives to be susceptible to change through a new reading list. As Katha Pollitt points out, "books cannot mold a common national purpose when, in fact, people are honestly divided about what kind of country they want." That the books included in competing canons are made to bear the whole weight of what it means to be an American, she says, "speaks to the poverty both of culture and of frank political discussion in our time." By way of metaphor, Pollitt quotes Samuel Johnson, who, on his deathbed, "is supposed to have said to a friend who was energetically rearranging his bedclothes, 'This will do all that a pillow can do'" (332). Much as Johnson's well-meaning friend tried to make a pillow a barrier against pain and death, well-meaning anti-racist educators may be asking more of books than they can do.

Whether in the form of art or of propaganda, children's literature cannot perform anti-racist work on its own. The advantage of political children's literature that aspires to art is that it may allow us not merely to challenge prevailing discourses regarding reality and necessity, but to reimagine possibility. To make a difference, though, it must be part of an anti-racist effort that extends well beyond the individual teacher, author, or illustrator. If artistic literature is to make an important contribution to social change, it must be embedded in a frank discourse about race and racism. The generation of new imaginative possibilities will only help to promote social change if parents and educators abandon their commitment to preserving an imagined childhood innocence and instead commit to generating new knowledge about who we are and who we may become.[22]

NOTES

1. By "African-American history," Lyden apparently means the history of slavery, but of course the history of slavery is as much white as it is black history. Nor does the history of slavery exhaust African-American history.

2. The colorblindness of expressivist, child-centered approaches to education is discussed in Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue" and Willis, "Reading the World of School Literacy." The whiteness of colorblind caring is discussed in Thompson, "Not the Color Purple."

3. See, for example, Herbert Kohl's discussion of fourth graders being provided with a white-washed version of the Montgomery bus boycott in which racial conflict plays little or no role.

4. Although Locke's art/propaganda dichotomy is problematic for a number of reasons — including its very status as a dichotomy — it offers an important challenge to argument-based approaches to ideological, cultural, and educational change. I discuss some of the limitations of Locke's art/propaganda distinction in Thompson, "For: Anti-Racist Education."

5. A seemingly parallel self-consciousness and defensiveness is found in a good deal of the scholarly work being done on whiteness. Since whiteness theorists are rethinking white privilege, whereas those engaged in rethinking blackness are rethinking racial and cultural theories based in white, deficit assumptions, the parallel is by no means exact; nevertheless, it may be instructive. Just as many political and artistic reworkings of blackness were originally somewhat self-conscious and defensive, with the large body of exploratory and generative work coming into being only later, it may be that whiteness theory will come into its own as a generative and exploratory body of work only some years from now. If a distinctive children's literature were to emerge from whiteness theorizing, it is likely that that literature would also, initially, be self-conscious, and that — as with much of black children's literature — its integration of art and politics would lag some years behind theory and art for adults.

6. Locke, "Our Little Renaissance," 22.

7. Jessie Redmon Fauset was the editor. In effect, *The Brownies' Book* was a spin-off of *The Crisis* (the NAACP's journal), which upon occasion had published reviews of children's books, in addition to publishing a special children's number once a year. The Urban League's journal, *Opportunity*, also published some material for African-American children.

8. By contrast, the original magazine identified illustrators along with authors on the "Contents" page. It did not, however, identify photographers or the sources of title decorations. Louise Latimer and other black artists also contributed to *The Brownies' Book*.

9. *The Brownies' Book* also is notably sensitive to issues of diversity beyond the white/black dichotomy. For example, it self-consciously avoids much of the sexism to be found in *Floyd's Flowers*, and it situates the celebration of racial diversity in global terms inclusive of American Indians, Latina/os, Africans, Asians, Scandinavians, Jews, and others.

10. Quoted in *The Best of the Brownies' Book*, these goals were originally outlined in the October 1919 issue of *The Crisis* — the "Children's Number" for that year — where the new monthly magazine, *The Brownies' Book*, was announced.

11. See O' Meally, "Afterword," to *Black Misery* (unpaged); and Harris, "From Little Black Sambo to Popo and Fifina." Among Langston Hughes's books for children were five books in the Franklin Watts series of First Books for children (1952–1960), as well as *Popo and Fifina* (1932) (written with Arna Bontemps and illustrated by E. Simms Campbell), *The Dream Keeper* (a collection of poems published in 1932), and *Black Misery* (1969). Other children's books authors and illustrators associated with the Harlem Renaissance include Arna Bontemps, E. Simms Campbell, Ellen Tarry, Countee Cullen, and Jacob Lawrence.

12. For example, Katharine Capshaw Smith's recent interview with Ellen Tarry suggests that Tarry's books for children did not undergo censorship or self-censorship. Tarry simply found herself more or less in accord with the thinking of the white liberals whom she knew.

13. Also in the social conscience tradition, Tarry's first book, *Janie Belle* (illustrated by Myrtle Sheldon), was more obviously a lesson about love between the races, whereas *Hezekiah Horton* merely affirms the possibility of friendly white/black encounters. In contrast to these two earlier books, Tarry's and Harrington's *The Runaway Elephant* — the sequel to *Hezekiah Horton* — was in many ways a melting pot book, in which race does not particularly matter. Ellen Tarry, who arrived in New York City at the end of the Harlem Renaissance and became a close friend of several Renaissance writers, published picture books starting in the forties and later wrote biographies for young readers. See Smith; also Sims (97).

14. Harris, "African American Children's Literature" (548). Also see Baker, "The Changing Image of the Black in Children's Literature" (80).

15. Shirley Graham's brother, Lorenz Graham, also published children's books in the forties and fifties.

16. This figure refers to children's books published between 1973 and 1975. As the authors wished to compare their findings with Nancy Larrick's, they surveyed only publishers associated with The Children's Book Council. As a result, newer publishing houses — including alternative publishing houses — may not be represented in the survey.

17. Banneker's 1791 letter to Jefferson can be found in *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing*.

18. See the discussion of textbooks as a genre in FitzGerald, *America Revised*.

19. Quoted in Sims, "Race Riots, Cocktail Parties, Black Panthers, Moon Shots and Feminists" (20).

20. The current use of the term "uplift" differs from its historical usage. Whereas at one time uplift referred to the "improvement" of the race, it now refers to the political and economic advancement of African Americans. I use the term here in its modern sense.

21. Manzo, "Flap over 'Nappy Hair' Book Leads to Teacher's Transfer," (5).

22. This paper has benefitted from conversations with and comments from Kathy Spencer Christy, Kris Fassio, Johanna Hadden, Georgia Johnson, Bobbie Kirby, Jane Szucs, and Ivan Van Laningham.

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